HIGH RIVER

Changes

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Plenty of things are changing these days. Boundary lines -- ways of thought --ways of living. There is talk of the great changes that will inevitable follow this war.

These are big changes -- sudden changes. In seeing them, we sometimes miss the little changes that are part of our life here in Canada. They are going on all the time. Mostly, they are changes for the better. When we think about them -- which is not very often -- we call them progress.

Most of the people who live in Western Canada have longer, better, more productive lives than they did a quarter century ago. Diseases which were common then are almost unknown today. Hardships of those days are nothing but history. We have progressed.

I think the best way to bring out the nature of that progress is to look at a town which is quite typical of many in the West -- the town of High River in the foothills of Southern Alberta. What changes have taken place there?

Well, for one thing, take education. Twenty years ago, country children were lucky to get any kind of education. Many of them lived six, seven or even eight miles away from the nearest school. They had to go there on horseback.

That was all right in the good weather. But in the winter, it was not. A child riding to school might easily get caught in a sudden storm. And it is a terrible thing for an adult to be lost on the prairie in a blizzard -- let alone a child of seven or eight years.

Then there was the danger of a runaway or some other kind of accident.

Supposing a child was thrown on the way? He might lie for hours until he was found.

Well, that's all changed now. The whole district surrounding High River -- a total of some 700,000 acres -- has been made into one of the big school units which are springing up all over Alberta. That means every one of the 40 schools in the High River district has been brought under unified control. Small, isolated schools are being closed down, and big schools are being made even bigger.

These schools, with their workshops and radios and other facilities, are taking the children who used to go to the poky little schools. The children don't go on horseback, either; most of them go on vans, which travel special routes to pick up the children each morning and deposit them almost at their front doorstep each night.

If a child doesn't happen to live on a van route, the school unit gives his father what is called a transportation allowance. This is a generous sum of money, varying according to distance, and makes it possible for the child to go to school by car.

Sometimes, a large family, living a long way from the school, get such a generous transportation allowance that they move right into one of the towns and send the children to school there. The school unit does not object to this. Its idea is to see the children get an education.

The idea is carried out to the full. The way it used to be, a child was pretty lucky to get any education. But now the idea is to see h that every single child in the unit gets a public school AND a high school education. And they have come very close to perfection in that aim. This means a great deal to the thousand-odd children who live

in the country homes of the High River unit.

And these schools today mean so much more to the children. Look at the 40 schools in the High River unit. All but five have pianos. Many of them have radios, and gramophones for music appreciation. Typewriters are a common sight in these country schools; there are classes in handicraft, for the boys, cookery for the girls; good libraries; copying machines to save strain on the children's eyes; all of this is standard equipment, provided equally for all the schools by the central office of the big unit. An official of the unit told me: "We send them everything from mercurochrome to "Stage money".

Then there's health. Not so long agok typhoid was very common in the High River district. Diphtheria bobbed up quite often. There were two big smallpox epidemics just before the last war. One of them brought down 50 people. Most women had their children at home. The doctor had to come out on a rush call then.

Mothers got little or no care before and after birth of their child. Children grew up without much protection against disease. They drank milk that would be banned today, water that was open to question. As soon as a child was born, the germs of infectious disease were lying in wait for it.

The hospital was small and usually crowded. A trip to the hospital at High River might easily take all day. Two days even, for the isolated ranchers. Old superstitions flourished.

Today is a different story. High River's modern hospital has 60 beds, and serves an area of half a million acres. Taxpayers get hospital accommodation for only $1. a day; non-taxpayers get the same privilege for an annual subscription of $6.00. Out of every 100 babies born

in the district, 98 see the light of day in hospital. No matter how far away a family lives, they can usually get to the hospital in an hour. The hospital hasn't last a mother in six or seven hundred cases.

Moreover, High River has a big health unit. This is like the big school unit. It encourages healthy living throughout the district, and prevents disease. Diphtheria inoculations are given the children: vaccinations against smallpox and scarlet fever. Older children get tuberculin tests. Pure milk laws are enforced; water is analysed. Sanitation is rigorously inspected. And there is talk of a school dental clinic in the town itself.

In all this huge district, typhoid has almost been wiped out. There has only been one diphtheria case in the last ten years. As for smallpox -- there would be a sensation if one case appeared anywhere in the district.

Life has changed for the farm woman. Once she was lonely, isolated -- a prisoner of silence and the great distances. That's all changed. Now she hears Dr. Susan on the radio, phones up the beauty parlor in town and makes a date for an appointment, drives into town to pick up some groceries and half-a-dozen loaves of bread. And when she does get in town, nobody can tell, to look at her, whether she's a farm woman or a smart visitor down from the city.

The farm women used to live dreary lives. It would take them hours to come into town. In summer, they would arrive dusty and dishevelled. In winter, they would be half-frozen, despite the fact that they had on practically every stitch of clothing they owned. They would ride along behind the horses till they got to High River. Then a show of some kind, a little shopping, and back to the farm for another month or so of loneliness.

The telephone helped, of course. Before that, the only speedy means of communication was the moccassin telegraph. The moccassin telegraph is hard to explain. But it worked this way -- if you told a woman something in town at two o'clock, then a woman living 30 miles away would know about it by four. Nobody ever knew how it got around so fast; but it did.

The arrival of the telephone speeded up the process. It was enormously popular with the women at first. They would all listen in on every call. It wasn't really eavesdropping; they were just lonely. One rancher picked up his phone to make a call; all alone the line, he could hear the click-click-click of the women lifting off their receivers to listen in. So he said rather angrily: "You women get off the line; I'm going to sell a bull!"

The phone is still popular. In bad weather, country women will visit for hours via the phone. In good weather, they're more likely to phone the movie house in High River and ask what show will be on that evening.

Cooking was a monotonous task for the farm woman in the old days. Their shopping in town consisted mostly of prunes and apricots and dried apples. Corned beef and salt pork were staples. And, of cours, terrific quantities of flour and sugar -- enough to last them till their next trip in, which might be one, two or three months distant. It was quite common for a family to buy a ton of flour; 600 pounds of sugar. Coffee was a great treat; as for oranges, they were a sinful luxury.

Twenty years or so ago, a farm woman in the High River district would likely spend $10. a month on boughten groceries; the present-day figures

more around $30.00 a month.

Boughten bread is common in the farm homes. The younger generation have likely grown up on it, and turn up their noses at home-made bread, but home made bread hasn't vanished by a long shot. Many farm women bake bread occasionally, because they say, "It makes the kitchen smell nice."

The latest advance made by farm women in the High River district is an economic one. They have started a Credit Union, a sort of mutual loan society. The women will borrow money from their Credit Union for all sorts of good purposes -- to buy baby chicks, for example; to send a child to business school or normal school; to pay for medical or funeral expenses. One lady is planning to go east and see her married daughter. A loan from the credit union will pay her way. And the interest on these loans is so low as to be practically non-existent.

The car of course, has made a tremendous difference to life in the High River district. In the old days, journeys were painfully slow. A man would spend all winter bringing in his grain. And, as I explained a family visit to town was such a prodigious event that it only came once in a long time,

Then came the gas buggy. Everybody laughed, and said it was just a novelty. But the people who laughed the loudest were always the ones who wanted to ride in one -- just to see what it was like. They saw. And they bought. In 1917, one garage at High River sold 90 cars in three months. Everybody was learning to drive; farmers made the best pupils, because they knew how to handle a team.

Roads were bad in those days, even if a man had got a car. The trip to Calgary -- 40 miles -- took anywhere up to five hours. Cars would

get stuck in heavy mud on the mainroad. The only way to fix a mud-hole was to throw poles into it. One High River driver took his car over a mudhole in the main road. Someone had put poles in it, and one of them went right up through the body of his car. He went to the nearest farmhouse, borrowed a saw, sawed off the pole, and continued on his way.

The main road is smooth tar today, and most of the country roads are better now then the main highway was then. There are 2,000 cars in the district -- onr to a family. And 3,000 crawl over the land that was once a paradise for horse-breeders.

The other day, a man came up from Montana to buy horses. But nobody had any to sell. High River still has blacksmiths. They sharpen discs and plow shares, just as they did in the old days. But you would wait a long time to see a team shod. And you would have to look very hard to find a livery stable. Because there isn't one any more

A small change -- but an important one -- is High River's public library. This was started two years ago. You buy a 25cent card, and you can get 24 books during the year. If you want brand-new books, they cost you 15 cents a week. There are over 1,600 on the shelves today.

It is true that there were good books in the country homes of High River during the last war. But they were private libraries. And they were usually pretty dull. The habit of reading -- and the means to indulge it -- were not common. Today, however, you should not be in the least surprised to find a brand-new copy of Oliver Wiswell on the ranch-house verandah. Before Oliver is discarded by the High River library, he will probably have travelled many thousands of miles.

I mentioned radio. It is one of the biggest things that ever happened to the country home. County people are acutely well-informed on national and international affairs; and many a farm woman practically lives beside her radio. And the party line phone doesn't ring while the CBC news is on.

Last summer, a bunch of people drove up to a ranch in the hills, 50 miles from High River. When they got there, the ranch folk were jubilant. One of their horses had just won a race at Winnipeg. The race had been broadcast, and these people in the hills followed it right through. A generation ago, it would have taken the news from two to three weeks to reach them.

The shows have changed. A generation ago, it was quite an event when a small stock company arrived at High River to play some tear-jerker like Broken Blossoms, East Lynne, or No Mother to Guide Her. Then came the first motion pictures: Pollyanna, for example, and the early westerns. They were silent, of course; with a pianist providing the right kind of music at the right time. Horse operas were popular, with the management providing such sound effects as gunfire and the clatter of hooves. The post-war era saw Pearl White going through terrible disasters in the Perils of Pauline.

Well, you couldn't get anybody in the High River district to see a Wild W estern now, or Pearl White either. They wouldn't even come for a laugh. What they expect to see -- and so see -- at their movie theatre, is something like "Gone with the Wind" or "North West Mounted Police." They are no longer interested in horses that gallop up perpendicular cliffs, or men who shoot ten bullets without reloading. They are critical, well-informed, sophisticated.

Contry entertainments have changed, too. Parties used to be held

in the homes; the furniture was moved out; the rugs (if any) were rolled up, the fiddler or later the phonograph -- would start to scrape away and the fun would begin. Now the dances are held in community halls, which cost plenty of money. Furthermore, the young people insist on good floors for dancing -- and good orchestras.

Farming, of course, has been revolutionised in one generation by the machine. The average section in High River district used to keep 12 or 18 horses busy. Now one tractor does the job.

The teamster used to go out at five in the morning, feed, groom and water the horses, and finally be ready for work at seven. The farm boy goes out to the tractor with a can of gas, and he's ready to start. The old-time teamster, of course, has almost vanished. He made a life study of his job; but a high school boy can learn how to run a tractor in half an hour.

The hired hands are gone, too. Once upon a time, they swarmed into town at harvest time. Working in the fields from five in the morning to eight at night, they would make a poke of five or six hundred dollar in a season. But they are gone: the farmers no longer stand around the station at High River, waiting to catch the first brawny-looking lad that steps off the train.

The harvesters aregone. And so is the drudgery, the gruelling work they did before dawn till after dusk. Those were the days when one farmer picked up his hired hand and took him gladly away. The hired man said: "Will I need blankets?" . . . "Blankets?" said the farmer, "What for?" "Well, for the night-time". The farmer smiled broadly: "You won't need blankets, son; just a lantern."

Well, there are thousands of changes. Those are just a few of them. Some have had good effects; some bad. Much of the drudgery

amd loneliness have gone. But the neighborliness and easy-going tolerance have dwingled. Many a farmer never sees his neighbor these days -- unless he happens to meet him in the movie show. The land is all taken up. A generation ago, young couples could put the plow to cheap land and be set up in no time. Now, they can't get on the land unless they have thousands of dollars in cash. And, of course, we must admit that enormous debts have accumulated upon us in the last generation.

But on the whole, I think, the gains outweigh the loses. Most of our changes have been for the better. We have progressed. And I think we will continue to change and progress, because that idea of change and progress is the past, the present and the future of the Canadian West.